

Reaching the Masses on Their Own Time

The Parallel Between Viral marketing and Psychological Operations

by Colonel Ken Blakely

Editorial Abstract: *The explosion of broadband Internet access has enabled the invention of a novel marketing tool based on social networks and customer interest – viral marketing. Viral is proven to be responsive, engaging, effective and inexpensive, leveraging the customers’ own interest to send a message. While viral marketing is antithetical to some of the basic elements of the formal definition of psychological operations, it nonetheless fits enough of the elements – and fits them well enough – to qualify as psychological operations.*

In May of 2007, an interesting video began appearing on social networking sites across the internet. Running less than three minutes, the clip consisted of several disconnected vignettes sharing a common theme – one man tosses a pair of sunglasses, and another man catches them on his face in perfect position. With the vignettes getting progressively more difficult and outlandish, the video oozed trendiness, camaraderie, and a quirky bonhomie that made it instantly fascinating.

The video was known as “Catch,” within a week, it had been posted on over 25 of the most popular social networking and video sharing sites, and it had begun spreading.¹ Users other than the original poster began reposting it to their own blogs and pages, and consumer-interest sites such as The Consumerist and Gizmodo found it turning up in their forums and user comment logs. Within a few months, Catch had been viewed well over five million times on YouTube alone.² It continues to grow and spread, and over a year after it was released, Catch is still featured on third and fourth-tier social networking sites.

It was over a week before the marketing company of Omnicom Cutwater formally admitted to creating, and releasing, the video as part of a paid advertising scheme for Ray-Ban Incorporated.³ By the time, the world knew that ‘Catch’ was a marketing ploy, it had been viewed by – and presumably influenced the purchasing decisions of countless millions of consumers in Ray-Ban’s target demographic. It was one of the first successful examples of mass advertising via viral marketing. It was also an excellent example of a successful psychological operation (PSYOP) campaign.

WHAT EXACTLY IS VIRAL MARKETING?

Viral Marketing (VM) is a relatively new phenomenon in the civilian advertising world. One researcher in marketing tactics has proposed that viral marketing is “... **unpaid peer-to-peer communication of provocative content originating from an unidentified sponsor using the internet to persuade or influence an audience to pass along the content to others.**”⁴

VM is a novel and (to the advertising community) exciting tool to get a message to a target audience. When executed correctly, it is engaging, penetrative, convincing, self-propagating and inexpensive. VM messages are in use right now to reach millions of

consumers, influencing their perceptions, their reasoning about certain products, and their purchasing behavior.

The first generally acknowledged VM campaign was a simple line of text placed at the bottom of all emails originating from Microsoft’s free Hotmail webmail service. When emails move between recipients, the marketing message moves and propagates as well, increasing exposure, brand awareness, logo association and market saturation. There was originally some concern that “buzz marketing” or “stealth marketing,” as it was sometimes referred to was illegal or unethical.^{6,7} Indeed, some initial incarnations of VM were



YOUTUBE Ray Ban Video
Source www.youtube.com

associated with subliminal advertising, and several marketers absorbed no small amount of bad press from their initial efforts.^{8,9,10,11} Marketers have become more effective however, and VM seems no longer to be associated with seedy, underhanded efforts.

VM works by providing an engaging visual story and releasing that story into the media in a stealthy way. The growth of Internet social networking and video sharing platforms has provided the springboard for VM, and a proper VM campaign succeeds by encouraging people to absorb the message and pass it on voluntarily.¹² In these and several other ways, VM provides a remarkable civilian allegory to a well-planned and executed PSYOP campaign. As we will see, viral marketing is simply PSYOP by another name.

WHY IS VIRAL MARKETING PSYOP?

The joint pub on psychological operations tightly defines PSYOP as:

*...planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence the emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals.*¹³

The operative elements in this definition are:

- planned
- conveying selected (i.e., specific) information,
- to foreign audiences
- to influence emotion, motives, reasoning and behavior

With the formal definition of PSYOP thus broken down, it becomes a trivial task to demonstrate that viral marketing fits the bill.

Successful VM campaigns are universally planned, often to a very precise and, some might say, military standard.^{14,15} Corporations that wish to advertise will normally engage the services of viral marketing experts, and those experts will plan, choreograph and produce the media, ensuring it is high enough

quality to be entertaining and useful, but not so high quality as to be an obvious marketing effort.¹⁶ Extensive planning and coordination goes into the selection of the timing and platform of launch, with choices ranging from social networking sites such as Facebook, video sharing sites such as YouTube and discussion forums such as those found on Fatwallet.com and Consumerist.com. The metrics involved with deciding where and how the VM product is ‘seeded’ are robust and detailed, and planners often spend days debating and deciding on exactly the right mix for a successful campaign.¹⁷

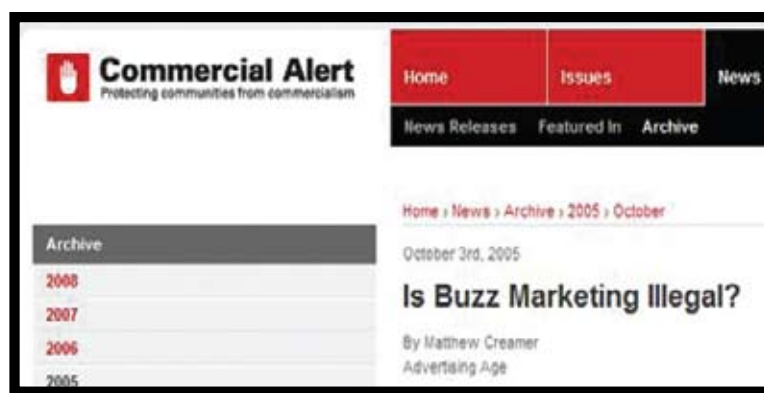
The message conveyed by a VM effort is often quite specific – buy something, watch something, do something or be something. In all cases, the message is about commerce and the intent is to drive the use or purchase of a product. An argument can be made that VM’s intent is not to convey information – as specifically required by the definition of PSYOP – but rather to drive behavior. While this distinction is pedantically correct, it also misses the point that the entire point of the exercise for both VM and PSYOP is to place an idea or message in the minds of the target audience. To the extent that VM can be shown to drive consumption of the subject product – which it can¹⁸ – it is clear that a properly constructed VM campaign conveys information in the manner envisioned by Joint Pub 3-53.

The clearest and most convincing element to compare is the final one; that of influencing the emotions, motives, reasoning and behavior of the target audience. Such influencing is the *raison*

d’être of marketing in general, and to present it as a defining feature of the similarity between VM and PSYOP would be a tautology. More to the point, the general understanding of PSYOP is that it is stealthy in nature, and that the influencing is often accomplished without the knowledge of those being influenced.^{19,20,21} This precisely defines the nature of viral marketing, wherein the target audience is exposed to a message that motivates them to buy something or do something without genuinely knowing the origin of the message. In the example of the video “Catch”, the message is transmitted by the trendy tone, the upbeat music, the fascinating stunts and the bonhomie of the characters. The fact that the sunglasses being caught are RayBan Wayfarers seems not even part of the message, and yet emotions, reasoning and behavior are clearly influenced – the post-Catch sales figures for RayBan and the very fact that the video propagated so wildly attest to that.²²

WHY VM IS IT NOT PSYOP?

The salient element that doesn’t seem to fit lies in the target audience. There seems to be no restriction within international law on the use of ruses or deception on domestic audiences,²² but there are most certainly specific legal injunctions within US code against targeting US persons with PSYOP.²³ This general restriction is common among many western democracies and the general openness of their societies seems to militate against the kind of intentional deception and manipulation that PSYOP suggests. Thus, it is an artifact of the



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American experience that causes Joint Pub 3-53 to classify PSYOP as specifically targeted to foreign audiences, and the distinction that this particular element of the formal definition of PSYOP doesn't fit viral marketing seems unnecessary.

An even less convincing argument against the classification of VM as PSYOP is that VM aims to transmit a feeling or impression that generally leads to behavior, whereas PSYOP classically transmit a more specific, directive message straight to the target. Again, this seems a pedantic distinction, as the ultimate goal in both cases is specific behavior. What limited weight this argument carries actually lies in the fact that PSYOP as practiced by US operators seems overly focused on what might be termed direct marketing – leaflets, broadcasts, websites²⁴ – and shies away from the kind of surreptitious influence that is the hallmark of viral marketing. Reorienting the efforts of US psywarriors to make best use of new techniques like VM is a fertile area for new research.

AND NOW WHAT?

The intersection between the marketing and advertising world and that of information operations is well known, if not well documented or well studied. Psywarriors know instinctively that what they do in operations is simply a militarized (and often simplified) version of Madison Avenue. Thus, the observation that viral marketing is PSYOP is perhaps not groundbreaking. Nonetheless, in order to appreciate the potential power of marketing techniques – and completely understand the nuances of influencing a target demographic – these seemingly obvious parallels must be teased out of the mix that is psychological operations.

IO Sphere Editor's Note: Colonel Blakely's observation about viral marketing and PSYOP is more salient when considering that most viral marketing has the source of the marketing message obfuscated. Therefore, in PSYOP regulation and policy it would be considered "Grey" or "Black" PSYOP. The fact that VM is widespread is an acknowledgement that marketers are not subject to the same level of regulation and oversight as PSYOP warriors.

Footnotes:

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